

An assessment of Nebraska's draft 2012 social studies standards.

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Though I was approached to write this assessment due to my recent reviews of state history standards for the Fordham Institute, I should make clear from the outset that the following critique is *not* akin to a Fordham review. I have, as requested, taken Nebraska's local-control approach and basic standards concept as a given: my aim is simply to assess the breadth, depth, clarity, specificity and measurability of the draft as laid out in the state's reviewer guidelines.

Treating each of those review categories separately would have unavoidably fragmented my observations, which frequently address several of these criteria at once. I have therefore organized my comments first by the four standards documents – history, civics, economics, geography; then by the sub-strands within each document; and finally by grade. Indicator numbers for specific content items are referred to throughout.

History:

General remarks:

- The adoption of a grade-by-grade arrangement for K-5 is a welcome change. However, within the larger 6-8 and high school blocks, I would urge the state to offer at least a suggested sequence, indicating where the specific courses might be placed within these wider bands. For example, the 6-8 and high school U.S. history courses are clearly intended, from their chronological coverage, as parts I and II of a full U.S. survey: it would be best, therefore, if those two courses were not too far apart – in grades 8 and 11, for instance, standard in many states. It would be wise at least to urge local districts to consider the issue. Many states which leave the exact grade-level sequence to local districts nonetheless provide one or more recommended sequences.
- The division of target skills between the various sub-strands (“chronological thinking,” “historical comprehension,” etc.) is to my mind rather arbitrary. Surely, for instance, all historical study includes “analysis and interpretation,” despite the inclusion of a separate sub-strand with that name. While I can see how the study of and distinction between primary and secondary sources could fit under “multiple perspectives,” it is hard to see why such study does not equally belong under “analysis and interpretation,” or indeed under “research skills.” Likewise, separating analysis of “cause and effect” from the actual content – the former appears

under “historical analysis,” the latter largely under “historical comprehension” – seems to split knowledge and understanding into separate boxes.

Nonetheless, I recognize that these sub-strand divisions were doubtless decided upon at a very early stage in the development of these standards, and are presumably not open to re-thinking.

- I should add, despite the concerns just noted, that I am pleased with the emphasis on reading primary sources, even in early grades, and the stress on distinguishing between primary and secondary content. I have encountered all too many college students who seem to struggle with that distinction: it is good to see it as part of Nebraska’s state mandate.

- The focus assigned to grades K-3, progressing outward from self to family to neighborhood to community, is of course standard educational practice, and not an unreasonable way to introduce early learners to a broader world-view. However, it is important urge teachers not to take too limited an approach. Young children are capable of more sophistication than is often asked of them. Basics of history and government can, for instance, be introduced in early grades – teachers should be urged not to take the assigned focuses too strictly or to reject glimpses of broader issues.

- I would advise expanding the course title for grade 5, and for world history at the 6-8 and high school levels. The 6-8 and high school U.S. courses indicate their chronological coverage in the titles. Since the world courses are also given a chronological split, breaking at about 1000 CE, it seems reasonable for clarity’s sake that their titles should reflect the course scope, as the titles of the U.S. courses do. I would strongly urge some such specificity in the title for grade 5 as well, since, as it stands, there is no sense how far the grade 5 course is meant to extend chronologically.

“Chronological Thinking”:

Grade 4:

The “chronology” concepts aimed at in grades K-3 seem reasonable as far as they go. But those assigned to grade 4 (4.4.1.a) – “decades, centuries, millennia” – are extremely broad and basic concepts that could certainly be included by grade 3. (If 3rd graders can be asked, at 3.4.2.c, to discuss primary and secondary sources, they can certainly understand what centuries and millennia are.) The content in grade 4 should also have some specific connection to Nebraska, since this grade is clearly meant to offer an introductory course on Nebraska’s local history. In middle school and high school courses with specific historical focus, the standards quite properly use the “temporal sequence” heading to lay out the broad chronological eras to be covered in that grade. The same would be highly advisable in grade 4, where a basic sense of Nebraska

chronology (i.e., Native American peoples to American settlement etc.) would better connect this standard to the grade's focus, and would be more age-appropriate than the very basic concepts now listed here.

Grade 5:

The same basic problem appears in grade 5 (5.4.1.a). Again, the “temporal sequences” concept introduced here (“BC, BCE, AD, CE”) is very basic, and could be introduced earlier. Even if it is specifically desired to include those concepts at this level (they are after all recapped in middle school world history), the very vague reference to “eras” should be expanded upon – for exactly the reasons I urged for grade 4 above. A basic list of U.S. eras would be particularly helpful here since (as I noted in my general remarks above) the intended scope of the grade 5 course is in no way specified. The specific historical examples given in later 5th grade sub-strands all appear to be pre-Civil War, yet it is not indicated what time period the course is ideally meant to reach. I realize much is being left to local schools and districts, but given the emphasis on “measurability,” uniform assessment surely requires at least a broadly similar approach to the course's scope across the state.

High school:

The list of eras at 12.4.1.a should distinguish key 20th century events more carefully. A single “World Wars” heading leaves out the Depression and New Deal, which had massive impact on the course of the century both domestically and globally. I would strongly recommend replacing this single item with three: World War I, Depression & New Deal, World War II.

“Historical Comprehension”:

Grade 1:

The list of examples at 1.4.2.a could certainly be expanded – particularly the list of historical individuals. While Lincoln and King are both wholly appropriate, teachers could be given broader pointers. (Examples might include an important figure or two from Nebraska.)

Grade 3:

3.4.2.a is actually less specific and more narrow than 2.4.2.a, even though the grade level is higher, and the 3rd grade “community” focus is a far broader concept than 2nd grade's “neighborhood” topic. Grade 2 includes such broad-scale concepts as Native Americans, Colonists, the White House and Independence Day, suggesting some study of wider American history. Grade 3 refers, in purely general terms, to local figures, landmarks, celebrations and

events. If grade 3 is intended to turn to a closer local focus, the grade-level headings do not reflect that intention – and more specific examples of the listed concepts could be provided in any case.

Grade 4:

4.4.2.a mixes a few very general “era” concepts (westward expansion, statehood) with a smattering of named individuals. As I noted above in the “chronological thinking” sub-strand, I would urge better matching the format here to that of later grades. In middle and high school, an attempt is made to lay out the key chronology – first in very broad terms under “chronological thinking,” then with greater specificity in the “comprehension” sub-strand. That model should be followed wherever a specific course on particular content is intended... including here in the grade 4 overview of Nebraska history. A listing of the basic themes (from Native American peoples, to American settlement and expansion, to the key Kansas-Nebraska disputes of the 1850s, etc.) would not only help teachers, it would help ensure a degree of common coverage across the state – essential to any aims of measureable assessment. Specific names the state wishes to list could be tied to the themes in a brief outline – which is indeed done in later grades.

A further point arises with 4.4.2.b – which equally applies to unit “2.b” in all subsequent grade levels. Students are to describe “change over time” using maps, documents, and other artifacts. While this is a reasonable requirement, here and at all levels, I suspect it would be useful if teachers were provided with at least a single example at each grade level. For Nebraska, changing settlement patterns could be noted as an example, or the gradual loss of land by Native Americans. And so forth, for subsequent grades – there are thousands of possible choices, but *some* concrete example would certainly help teachers grasp what is being asked.

Grade 5:

As I noted above, the scope of the grade 5 course is not clearly defined. As in grade 4, 5.4.2.a offers only a rather random list of people (two founders, two Native Americans and that’s it), plus a few general concepts (“colonization,” “early conflicts,” etc.). Again, the *scope* is never specified, and the scattershot list of examples is little help in discerning it: there should be a basic list of periods, as in later grades. I understand that the aim here was not to be comprehensive – but this is simply too vague as it stands. Some effort should be made to indicate to teachers which concepts are *key*, at least basic concepts such as the Revolution, Constitution, westward expansion, Civil War, etc.

Grades 6-8, U.S.:

Firstly, I wish to draw sharp attention to one very important point: the reference to the Iroquois Confederation in 8.4.2.a should **NOT** be there. In the list of periods/specifics, the Iroquois are joined together with “Founders and Founding Documents.” The clear purpose is to invoke the idea, all too common in state standards and beyond, that the Iroquois Confederation was an important influence on the Constitution’s framers. I can assure you most vigorously as a historian of the Revolutionary era that this claim is **a myth**: it has been completely debunked time and time again, and is not taken seriously by any serious scholar of the period.* This is a question of historical fact, not a matter of opinion or interpretation. If a reference to the Iroquois is desired, it should be placed earlier, in connection for instance with the French and Indian War. It should **not** be linked with the Constitution.

* See, for instance, Pulitzer Prize-winner Gordon Wood in “The Purpose of the Past: Reflections on the Use of History,” *Historically Speaking*, Vol. 10, no. 1, Jan. 2009, p. 4.

Beyond that notable problem, the content overview at 8.4.2.a is a significant improvement over the earlier grades – it aims, at least, to offer teachers across the state a basic checklist of periods and concepts. There are, however, some problems as it stands. Firstly, there are some odd violations of chronology: why, for instance, are “First Americans” listed *after* European contact and the triangular trade? The triangular trade itself should be contextualized with some reference to the rise of slavery in the colonies, and there should be some reference to the rise of democratic institutions in the colonial world as well. Some of the specifics also seem a bit random. Why “Spanish missions” but not the broader Spanish conquest or empire, for example? A few added words here and there could make the list stronger and more useful.

Grades 6-8, World:

Even more so than the 6-8 U.S. listing at 8.4.2.a, the content laid out for world suffers from randomness and chronological confusion. Why is the Gupta Empire listed before Ramses II, when it rose some 1500 years later? Why does Judaism appear (grouped oddly with Buddhism) well after Christianity and Islam, both of which arose out of Judaism? Why, too, is the “Roman Coliseum” listed without any reference to the Roman Empire as such? (Also, “Colosseum” is the preferred spelling for the ancient structure, as opposed to “Coliseum” used for modern sports facilities.) Why are the Olympics mentioned without reference to the classical Greeks, and the Mayan calendar without reference to the Maya, or Maya writing? It’s fine to have specific “hooks” to help teachers grab students’ interest, but such hooks should be explicitly linked to the broader themes they are meant to illustrate.

High school, U.S.:

The overview of modern U.S. specifics at 12.4.2.a is again a reasonable start, but it has some odd omissions and other flaws. “World Wars” is too general – especially when it is linked with

Woodrow Wilson and the League of Nations: World War I should be mentioned specifically. I would urge that a reference to Prohibition be added after WWI, given its tremendous influence on the 1920s. The Depression and FDR are listed, but the New Deal is not named: it should be. WWII should be mentioned specifically before the references to Eisenhower, the Holocaust, etc. Eleanor Roosevelt should not appear *after* JFK. Ronald Reagan, leader of the 1980s conservative movement, should not appear before the 1960s Civil Rights era, and Watergate should not be lumped with “contemporary” events such as 9/11. “Supreme court decisions” and “key legislation” are extremely vague pointers: some specifics would doubtless be welcomed – *Brown v. Board* and the Voting Rights Act to go with the Civil Rights era, for instance.

High school, World:

The high school World history overview suffers from the same flaws noted above: while many key concepts are appropriately mentioned, some choices seem random and much is missing. Why is Charlemagne the only example for the medieval period – especially given that he reigned quite early in the Middle Ages? Feudalism and chivalry should, at least, rate a mention. Why does Montezuma appear without specific reference to the Aztecs? Examples for the “Contemporary World” consist solely of three African and Indian nationalist resistance figures, and a reference to globalization. While I have no objection to these examples, there is rather more to the contemporary world: reference to the actual fact of decolonization and nationalist movements might, for instance, make more sense of the figures listed, while other developments (the fall of Communism, democracy movements, Islamist tensions, developments in technology and communications) might certainly be mentioned.

“Multiple Perspectives”:

Grade 4:

4.4.3.a and b are examples of the approach I was suggesting for 4.4.2.b above: they ask students to think about the differences between variant accounts (a praiseworthy goal) and offer specific examples to help teachers implement the objective. 4.4.2.b should be handled similarly.

Grades 6-8, U.S.:

The use of examples in the 4.3.a & b headings for later grades is generally reasonable – details remain somewhat random, but I realize they are meant to illustrate concepts rather than to be comprehensive. But there are a few specific issues here and there.

The reference to the “New Colossus Speech” in 8.4.3.b is puzzling. “The New Colossus” is the title of Emma Lazarus’s famed poem about the Statue of Liberty. Unless this item is meant as a

reference to President Obama's 2010 immigration speech which quoted the poem (which I assume it is not), "speech" is a mistake.

Grades 6-8, World:

The reference to "Mt. Everest" in 8.4.3.a's world history coverage is confusing. What about it, exactly? It is the only example given in the list that isn't obviously linked to historical events or issues.

High school:

Given the reference to Olaudah Equiano in 12.4.3.b, you should be aware of the recent scholarship on the subject, which has raised doubts about whether Equiano was actually born in Africa (he may have been born in South Carolina), and has thus raised questions about important parts of his narrative. These issues are far from settled, but should be approached with due caution – though the impact his narrative had when it was published is beyond dispute.

"Historical Analysis and Interpretation":

All grades:

4.4.a: This item, introduced in grade 3 and continuing through all grades, is in my opinion not clearly worded. The directive to examine or analyze "resources through sourcing, contextualization, and corroboration" is likely to cause confusion. "Resources" should be defined: historical documents and narrative accounts are clearly meant. It should also be clearer that students are to consider the impact of a narrative's source on its reliability, that documents must be understood in their context, and that reliability depends heavily on corroboration. As it is worded, though the concepts are sound, I think some will miss the point.

In grades 6-8, the word "resources" is replaced by "sources" – a better choice if still not fully explicated. In high school, it becomes "competing historical narratives" – again, I see what is meant, but "competing" may cause confusion. Perhaps "conflicting" or "contradictory"?

4.4.b: Here I would question the term "alternative courses of action." The focus seems to be on decision making and the different paths historical events could take... not quite the same thing as "alternative courses of action."

Also, in the grade 5 item under this heading (5.4.4.b) the example given – "What causes revolutions to occur" – seems better suited for world history (and even there, I would caution against overbroad generalizations about unique events). It's not clear, further, how this question

relates to “alternative courses of action,” or which revolutions it refers to in an American context: in the literal sense, we’ve only had one.

4.4.c: “Human decisions” is, in my opinion, also not the best phrasing. What decisions in history are not “human”? Perhaps instead “the decisions of historical individuals,” or something to that effect? Also, “Supreme Court decisions” are mentioned in this heading for grades 6-8 (8.4.4.c) – why are they not mentioned for the second part of the U.S. survey at 12.4.4.c? Supreme Court decisions were just as central in the 20th century as in the 19th.

4.4.e: In relating historical events to current events, some examples would undoubtedly be helpful. Students might, for example, consider how the government structures developed in the Constitutional Convention impact today’s political battles; or they might consider how the Civil Rights movement has affected today’s America; or how the rise of many global religions affects today’s globalizing world. And so forth.

“Historical Research Skills”:

All grades:

4.5.a: The directive to “develop questions” about history is *so* general I question whether it needs to stand as a separate heading. It could easily be integrated with the three headings below directing students to develop research skills.

4.5.c.: I commend the emphasis on active research in the early grades, an excellent aim.

Civics:

“Forms and Functions of Government”:

Grades 1-3: Certain basic concepts about U.S. government should in my opinion be added to these grades. As it stands, in grade 4 students are suddenly asked to relate their state government to the three-branch model of the U.S. government – without that model having been introduced at an earlier level. Likewise, grade 4 invokes unicameralism in the Nebraska context, without it or bicameralism being discussed earlier. Students in early grades are certainly capable of grasping the rudiments, and should do so before they are asked to apply such concepts to local government in grade 4.

Grade 5:

5.1.1.b, discussing the roots of American constitutionalism, should contain a reference in its examples to the early U.S. state constitutions created after independence – a crucial but too-often overlooked step in American constitutionalism. I am pleased to see that the Iroquois do *not* appear here. They should **NOT** be added.

If the reference to tribal forms of government in 5.1.1.c (contrasted with the British monarchy and American colonial governments) is meant to again invoke the mythical Iroquois influence on American constitutionalism, this item should be reworded.

In 5.1.1.d, the reference to “nobles” among early American political groups is misleading and probably confusing. There was never a system of nobility in the U.S. or the British-American colonies. The only nobles in the colonies were some royally appointed officials (mainly governors) that held British titles.

In 5.1.1.f, invoking the national government’s influence on local and state governments, an “e.g.” could be added mentioning the Constitution’s supremacy clause, together with the 10th and 14th amendments.

Grades 6-8:

In 8.8.1.b, listing key political documents, the Bill of Rights should be added to the list of examples. The wording of 8.1.1.c – “describe the structure and roles of government” – is overbroad and nonspecific. I would suggest, at the very least, adding “in different times, places and societies” (a global focus seems to be implied by the other 6-8 items, linked to the middle school world history course).

High school:

Again, I am pleased to see in 12.1.1.a, where influences on American constitutionalism are listed, that the Iroquois do *not* appear. Again, they absolutely should **NOT** be added. However, a reference to the state constitutions of the 1780s *should* be added.

In 12.1.1.f, “Communism” and “Fascism” do not belong in a discussion of “supranational organizations”: both are ideologies and systems of totalitarian rule, not international bodies. Given the current political controversies involving such organizations (particularly the U.N.), listing Fascism and Communism here could easily be taken as an effort at guilt-by-association, a

political statement that I'm sure was not intended. Communism and Fascism belong in world history or in a discussion of different modes of government – not in this item.

“Civic Participation”:

Grade 2:

In 2.1.2.a, listing characteristics of good citizenship, I would add tolerance for a diversity of opinions (which is suggested in 3.1.2.c).

Grade 5:

5.1.2.b, mentioning the reasons for the settlement of the American colonies, does not obviously fit in a civics context unless pursuit of personal, communal and religious freedom is mentioned as an aim. Likewise, I would add a reference here to the rise of democratic institutions in the colonies (town meetings in New England, elected representative bodies in many colonies), which meshes with the U.S. history content meant to be covered in this grade.

Grades 6-8:

The “civic participation” curriculum laid out here for the middle school grades seems rather basic for the age level – there is considerably less substance here than in grade 5. Given that the first part of the full U.S. history sequence is also placed in these grades, I would urge adding some specific references to the steady efforts of more and more Americans to gain a political voice: e.g., Jacksonian democracy, Seneca Falls, and so forth.

High school:

In 12.1.2.d, the directive to “demonstrate an ability to appropriately engage” with various levels of government is not entirely clear. Are students meant to demonstrate knowledge of the appropriate *methods* by which to engage with government, or are they actually meant to go out and do so?

Economics:

There is comparatively little to say about the economics standards. They are, on the whole, factual and competent, pointing to key issues and concepts. I am aware of the political pressure that was put on the state to trumpet the supremacy of free markets (as Texas did in its recent and highly problematic standards). I am pleased to see that a more balanced tone has instead been

pursued, appropriately focusing on and explaining market economics but without undue ideological baggage.

“Markets”:

Grade 1:

In 1.2.2.a, I would urge adding “minerals” to the list of natural resources – mineral resources have been key in all regions throughout history.

Grade 2:

In the heading for 2.2.1, I find the phrasing unclear. What exactly is meant by “something must be given up”? Is that meant to imply a something-for-something exchange? Or is it meant to indicate that resources are limited, and that students must learn to choose between different wants in order to stay within their means? In either case, the wording could be improved.

“Financial Literacy”:

High school:

The emphasis on teaching students personal financial responsibility is an excellent idea – especially as students are preparing for adulthood. I still cringe at the memory of a high school student I encountered: she had just received her first credit card, and loudly declared “It’s like getting stuff for free!” Units on understanding and managing personal credit seem well advised.

“Government”:

All grades:

Units 2.10.a & b again wisely avoid an ideological pitfall, urging students to understand the role of government in providing services and the role of taxes in financing such services – basic concepts that should transcend political quarrels.

High school:

In 12.2.11.a’s directive to “critique how governments can use tax and spend policies to influence behavior” – firstly, that should be “spending,” not “spend” (“tax and spend” is rather politically loaded). Secondly, I would urge a more neutral word than “critique.” Perhaps “consider” or “examine”?

12.2.13.b discusses tariffs, quotas and embargos. All have played major roles in U.S. history, from the non-importation movements of the Revolutionary period, to the 1807 embargo in the buildup to the War of 1812, to the sectional battles over tariffs before the Civil War, etc., on up to recent debates about free trade and protectionism. A few historical examples here could amplify the point, tying it in to the history standards and to contemporary issues.

Geography:

“The World in Spatial Terms”:

In broad terms, I think too little is being asked of students in early grades. Students even at the earliest grade-levels are, for example, perfectly capable of learning where “home” is on a map (I remember learning to recognize Massachusetts when I was three). Grade 2’s 2.3.1.a directs students to “identify the globe as a model of Earth.” While true map-reading skills obviously come later, I would argue that students can grasp such concepts before grade 2.

“Places and Regions”:

Grades 6-8:

In 8.3.2.b, students are to analyze the impact of terrain “on human decisions.” This is, I think, too vague. Examples of terrain features are given, but nothing is said about what humans might decide in consequence. There should, I would say, be reference to settlement patterns, hunting options, natural resources, city siting, routing of roads, etc.

“Human Environment Interaction”:

This sub-strand title is marked with a query in the current draft, and I agree it is somewhat awkward. Perhaps “Humans and their Environment,” or something along those lines?

Grades 4 & 5:

The grade 5 heading refers to Native Americans’ adaptation to and impact on the environment, but the item referring to those issues appears instead in grade 4 (4.3.5.a) – with wording almost identical to that in the grade 5 heading. That seems to suggest a mistake in alignment.

High school:

The issues of climate change and environmental damage, made in 12.3.5.g, should really be introduced in earlier grades. Though I recognize that there may be political pressures not to do so, these are questions today's children will regularly encounter from an early age.

Concluding remarks:

Even taking Nebraska's belief in local control and broad approach to standards as a given, content overviews should be clear and consistent in detail. Chronological sequence should be respected, to avoid confusing readers; broad concepts of equivalent importance should be touched upon in equivalent depth. Since the state aims to guide the general contours of social studies courses throughout the state, those contours should be adequately defined. Otherwise, it is unlikely that students across the state will be exposed to a shared core of basic knowledge – which Nebraska clearly intends that they should.